



## Slovak Presidency of the EU Council: Implications for the Visegrad Group

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*Slovakia's presidency of the Council of the European Union will be dominated by the debate on EU reform in light of Brexit. The government in Bratislava will try to link current community policy to its national interests and improvement of Slovakia's image in Europe. Therefore, the Slovak position on possible institutional reform or energy policy may differ from the Polish stance. If the Visegrad Group has the ambition to use the Slovak presidency to strengthen its role in Europe, it will be necessary to develop a uniform approach to the key issues of the EU.*

**Brexit and Reform of the EU.** The most important task of the Slovak presidency of the EU Council will be to lead the debate after the outcome of the referendum in the United Kingdom, where its citizens voted for withdrawal from the European Union. On the one hand, these results have already affected the schedule of the EU presidency: the official programme was announced only after the referendum, on the eve of the presidency's inauguration. On the other hand, the debate on reform of the EU will hinder wide discussion on the proposals of the presidency. The informal EU summit in Bratislava scheduled for mid-September—without the United Kingdom—will discuss the future of the Union. While Poland is a proponent of limiting the competences of EU institutions to the advantage of national parliaments, including by changing the treaties, the Slovak presidency will have to propose a common approach to the issue of reform of the Union.

Although the importance of the presidency of the member states has been greatly reduced, the prospect of Brexit and the current political dynamics can help it regain meaning. One burden on the presidency, however, is the ongoing Member State dispute with the European Commission on placing 120,000 refugees across the bloc. Slovakia has appealed the Commission's decision to the Court of Justice of the EU. The Slovak presidency is also weighted by the anti-Islamic rhetoric of Prime Minister Robert Fico and the presence in parliament of the political formation People's Party Our Slovakia, with its openly fascist symbolism. This situation means that the presidency under Slovakia will be cautious in pushing political demands that arouse controversy in Western Europe.

**Current EU Policies.** In presenting the priorities of the presidency, Slovakia pointed to strengthening Europe's economy, modernising the common market, working on permanent migration and asylum policy, and strengthening the global commitment of the Union. The government in Bratislava, though, will try to implement those elements of EU policy that coincide with the national interests of Slovakia. At the same time, these goals arouse particular interest in Poland and among the Visegrad Group.

In discussions about the future shape of EU-UK relations, Slovakia will advocate for maintaining close economic ties with the United Kingdom. As a beneficiary of the European Single Market—and the largest automobile manufacturer *per capita* in the world—Slovakia will advocate for the preservation of the four freedoms of the EU (free movement of goods, services, people and capital). Slovakia also will try to block a European Commission amendment to the regulation on posted workers. Meanwhile, the mid-term review of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and planning for next year's budget will fall during this presidency. Bratislava will try to ensure the maintenance of existing cohesion policy funding. Although there is work to be done on a common asylum law, maintaining Schengen in its current form, and strengthening the Union's external borders through a new European Border and Coast Guard, Slovakia is unlikely to be highly active in this regard. Instead, Slovakia may be more interested in the debate on fiscal

integration, which would deepen its ties within the EU as it remains the only Visegrad country that is also a member of the eurozone.

The current presidency has ambitious plans for energy and climate policy. Slovakia stresses the need to accelerate work on the Energy Union, which would allow the countries of Central Europe to have the chance to increase their independence from Russian gas supplies. Special emphasis has been placed on the EU Council's work on a Commission proposal from February of this year on the improvement of the security of the gas supply. In addition, the government in Bratislava will expect EU member states to ratify the Paris Agreement—the convention on global climate policy agreed in April this year. At the same time, the presidency will also seek to work out the position of the Council on the Commission's proposals for reform of the EU's emissions trading system.

**Global and Regional Cooperation.** The need to strengthen the EU's position in the world, expressed in the recently presented "EU Global Strategy," imposes on the Slovak presidency the need to address worldwide issues. Slovakia will seek to build political support for the completion of negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Agreement (TTIP). The end of U.S. President Barack Obama's term offers the chance to mobilise the governments of the EU Member States to support the Commission's stance on signing the free trade agreement with the United States. Separately, although the presidency programme omits the topic of relations between the EU and Russia, Slovakia will seek to improve them. A more balanced tone than previous presidencies can be expected during talks on the extension of sectoral sanctions or the Nord Stream II gas pipeline project. The ongoing discussion over Brexit will not be an obstacle for Slovakia in highlighting the need for further EU enlargement. At the opening of the key negotiating chapters with Serbia in mid-July, Slovak Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajčák stressed the commitment of the European Union to its obligations towards the Western Balkans, and therefore it can be expected that Slovakia will seek to mobilise the EU to take ambitious actions in the region. Within the framework of European Neighbourhood Policy, Slovakia will propose closer cooperation, including strengthening economic ties, in the Eastern Partnership with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

**Conclusions and Recommendations.** Due to the high dynamics of international events, the presidency model is changing and frequent *ad hoc* actions must be taken. Slovakia will focus on selected policies, combining the expectations of the other Member States with its own national interests. As always, the success of the presidency in the European arena lies more in its efficient moderation of debates on current issues—this time, mainly the negotiations on Brexit and on policies important to the future of the EU, such as migration or energy policy—than on the implementation of an ambitious agenda.

The government in Bratislava will not only try to present the country as a modern economy but also—in response to problems with its image—will propose measures conducive to close cooperation within the Union. Poland with particular caution should follow the proposals of the Slovak presidency in the debate on Brexit and possible EU institutional reform. Slovakia, which is supported by the Czech Republic on reform of the Union, may not submit as far-reaching demands as Poland or Hungary might propose. If those countries press further, it could result in their isolation, not only within the whole Community but also in the Visegrad Group, dramatically reducing the possibility for Poland to use this instrument in the debate about reform of the EU. Another contested issue may be energy policy, specifically the use of coal, which in the Slovak economy does not play a significant role, as well as the construction of Nord Stream II. A reconciliation of these positions is also important for the debate on the fiscal union. If the proposal for closer cooperation concerns only eurozone countries, Poland and the other non-euro V4 countries should press the Slovak presidency to prevent the institutionalisation of the idea because it could lead to deeper divisions in the EU. If it does not, Poland and the others risk falling behind or being left out of the main debate about European institutional reform.

The overlap of the Slovak EU Council presidency with the Polish presidency of the Visegrad Group might be the chance they need to respond to such challenges. The elaboration of common positions on the MFF, maintaining cohesion policy, which is beneficial for the V4 countries, and the Slovak presidency's support for the smooth ratification of the Paris Agreement should be complemented by a common approach to energy issues and Brexit. Slovakia's presidency is a favourable circumstance in this context and could bring a Central European perspective to these issues. In turn, the Polish presidency of the V4 provides a good platform to direct work on a common position. The chance has been created not only to eliminate the risk that the V4 countries will each go their own way but also that the collective voice of Central Europe will have more weight in the debate over the future of the EU. In practice, the effective use of this possibility will decide whether after the Slovak presidency, the Visegrad Group will be a stronger or weaker instrument to use in the European debate.